

9 Pentecost 2020

God of peace, make us contemplatives of nonviolence, prophets of nonviolence, and teachers of nonviolence. Help us to announce the revelation of justice and the revolution of love, that we may welcome your reign of peace. Amen.

The opening hymn was very appropriate for today. I am not sure that I had heard it before. I did not want to violate any copyright Laws so I did not print the music.

As the Bulletin states, it is # 639.

The words may vary a bit but go like this:

Come, O Thou Traveler unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see;
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.
I need not tell Thee who I am,
My misery and sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my name;
Look on Thy hands, and read it there!
But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou?
Tell me Thy name, and tell me now.
In vain Thou strugglest to get free;
I never will unloose my hold.
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of Thy love unfold:
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,
Till I Thy name, thy nature know.
Yield to me now, for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair;

Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
Be conquered by my instant prayer.
Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me if Thy name is Love!

For those of you who do not use our hymnal or the Methodist hymnal, you can find several versions of this hymn on the Internet. It relates to our first reading from Genesis today. The story of Jacob wrestling with a man, an angel, or God.

There are many thoughts among biblical scholars about what brought Jacob to this spot and with whom he actually wrestled. Or was the wrestling a metaphor? Was Jacob wrestling with his past? Was he wrestling with who he was and what he would become? Was he wrestling with how he had treated Esau and would he now be killed by Esau? How would he be received? Had a robber set upon him during the darkness of the night? Or was it really him fighting the **darkness of the soul**? Was God not willing to win the fight and why fight at all?

So many possibilities.

Look at Jacob. He managed not only to survive but to flourish in his interactions with people in his life. Often through dishonest if not clever means. He tricked people into getting what he wanted. Now he must face his brother Esau and he was afraid. --J. Mary Luti, wrote an article for 'Christian Century' entitled "You Are Israel," (October 7, 1998, 897) In part she said;

“God's ambush of Jacob at Jabbok was not a private experience. It was also to be his people's; or, as one scholar puts it, such stories of the past were "about THEM in an earlier embodiment." You are Israel, God said to Jacob; and we are, too.

When Jacob reached the river, and sent everything he had across ahead of him, we were there, too -- alone, stripped, agile, ready for anything, and desperately afraid. When a man appeared and fought with him all night, we felt the sweaty grasp of a God mortally engaged, both enemy and friend. And when he hit Jacob with a cheap shot, we, too, went slack, wounded as much by all our old treacheries as by our going to the mat with God. When Jacob gained the upper hand and the blessing, we prevailed with him, but it was not a victory; we still knew nothing of God's name. We were lucky just to have survived. And when the sun came up on Jacob, and he realized that the face most to be feared was not his brother's but God's, we, too, marveled that the worst that could ever happen was over; relieved, we crossed the river to Esau, dragging our leg like a prize”.

She continues:

“And now we know -- because we were there and it happened to us -- that God does not despise us for our supplanting and deceit, but forever ambushes our lives with new chances; that God does not renege on promises made even under duress; that God may slip away at daybreak, but never abandons us; that God can render us vulnerable to all our fast-approaching Esaus, the siblings we robbed of birthrights with whom we must make peace; that the gracious reunion of sinners and sinned-against is the blessing of God” . (end quote)

I don't know about you, but adrenaline only goes so far in a battle of wills. Eventually, fatigue sets in and the issue *has to be important enough*, for the fight to continue. It must be rooted **in** and come **from** the heart in order to persevere.

What a week we just went through. And that is saying a lot with everything we have experienced over the past 5 months. Two Hurricanes, one approaching the coast of Florida, and one that struck Corpus Christi TX. The death toll from Covid-19 reaching 150,000 Americans. Michigan has experienced 6500 deaths and there have been 12 here in Lenawee County. So much pain and loss.

The elections coming up still loom large for our country. I decided to be an Election Worker for Adrian this year. First time I have ever done this. But I feel it is so important for everyone to exercise their right to vote and to ensure that every single person has a place and a way to vote. That is a huge issue for this country especially for the disenfranchised. And it shouldn't be. I am not advocating for any candidate or any specific issue. Just the right to vote, to not place restrictions on voting, and for people to go out and vote.

That was certainly the passion for Congressman John Lewis who died this past week. He had a long history of service to his country and he started at a young age. As most of you all know, the Selma to Montgomery marches were three protest marches along the 54-mile highway from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery. The marches were organized by nonviolent activists to demonstrate the desire of African-American citizens to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

On March 7th, 1965, Hosea Williams and John Lewis led 600 demonstrators across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, on their march to Montgomery. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had planned to meet up with them later in the day.

However, on the east side of the Bridge, they were met with State troopers and Sheriff deputies, some on horseback. It became known as 'Bloody Sunday' after the deputies and troopers advanced on the marchers with tear gas and Billy clubs. John Lewis was beaten and sustained a fractured skull. He was hospitalized along with 50 of the demonstrators.

Due to the advent of Television, this was broadcast across the country.

On March 9th, Dr. King led more than 2,000 individuals on a second march to the bridge. They were again met by Law Enforcement and they decided to turn back. A case was pending to allow the march to take place without interference from the police and the judge had ordered Dr King not to demonstrate until the case was heard.

On March 17, after several days of testimony, Judge Johnson ruled in favor of the protestors and on March 21st, Dr King led somewhere between 3,000 to 8,000 marchers over the bridge. This time they were protected by Federal troops and the US Army as local law enforcement had refused to protect the marchers.

It was estimated that roughly 25,000 more marchers joined them along the way.

If not for television, these marches would probably have gone unnoticed outside of Alabama.

A few years back in an interview John Lewis said, "I'm deeply concerned that many people today fail to recognize that the movement was built on deep-seated religious convictions.

And the movement grew out of a sense of faith—faith in God and faith in one's fellow human beings. Sometimes when I look back and think about it, how did we do what we did? How did we succeed? We didn't have a website. We didn't have a cellular telephone. But I felt when we were sitting in at those lunch counter stools, or going on the Freedom Ride or marching from Selma to Montgomery, there was a power and a force. God Almighty was there with us." (end quote)

I have no doubt that John must have felt a lot like Jacob as he fought systemic racism in the deep South. He may have even felt like he was wrestling with God many times in his life. But he had faith.

In the book *Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*, Lewis included a chapter on faith. In it, he talked about living out principles of compassion and unity, concepts he said were shared by a range of faith groups, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others.

He wrote: "It was no accident that the movement was led primarily by ministers—not politicians, presidents or even community activists—but ministers first, who believed they were called to the work of civil rights as an expression of their faith. Religious faith is a powerful connecting force for any group of people who are working toward social change."

"Sometimes you have to find a way to get in the way, sometimes you have to find a way to make a way out of no way. Sometimes you have to find a way to get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble, and that's what we did."

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator once said, “it is essential to reduce the distance between what is said and what is done, in such a way that, at a given moment, your speech is your practice.”.

In other words: Not Do as I say and not as I do; but what I say **is** what I do.

As Christians, we are called be Jesus in the world. That means living out what we say on Sundays. It means actually doing what we believe. It means sometimes wrestling with God and asking God for a blessing. It will almost certainly mean wrestling with our past and going forth with new thoughts and ideas. It will mean a change in heart to sustain the journey and the fight. I vividly remember singing the song, ‘We Will Overcome’ as a teenager in youth groups and at retreats. It is a song that I love, but I can tell you, **that in no way** did it have the meaning and the impact on me that it had when it was sung in Montgomery by all those who had marched there in 1965. By all those who heard Martin Luther King Jr give his

" How Long, Not Long " speech on the steps of the State Capitol.

So how do we begin?

Coming up this month on each Thursday evening, Fr. Ron Byrd, Missioner for Black Ministries and creator of Sacred Ground, will lead our diocese in a special four week long diocesan-wide exploration of the Sacred Ground program.

Sacred Ground is described as a “sensitive, prayerful resource that creates space for difficult but respectful and transformative dialogue on race and racism. It invites participants to walk back through history in order to peel away the layers that brought us

to today, reflecting on family histories and stories, as well as important narratives that shape the collective American story.”

It is a chance for many of us to begin the story; **to first listen** and then to share our own stories. You can register by going to the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan website and I think it is totally OK if you don't happen to be Episcopalian.

My sisters and brothers, if you find that you have never wrestled with an angel or with God, you likely haven't developed the deep roots that one needs to follow Jesus in our world today which we are called to do. God's willing. Are you?